

Toledo's Mayor Michael Bell hopes Chinese investment will help revive his blue-collar city



Mayor Michael Bell hopes Chinese investment will help revive his blue-collar city. He helped broker a deal to sell a chunk of Toledo's waterfront to Chinese investors. Host Michel Martin and Mayor Bell discuss investments with China and what he thinks President Obama and China President Xi Jinping can accomplish during their U.S. visit.

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

I'm Michel Martin and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. We are going to spend a lot of time talking about China in the program today. President Obama is hosting China's new president Xi Jinping in California this weekend. They're expected to dig into some big issues like trade. But it's not just cell phones, clothing and auto parts that are being exchanged, how about Hollywood blockbusters? In a few minutes, we'll talk about how Hollywood is trying to crash China's lucrative movie market and the kinds of accommodations movie makers are willing to make to do that.

But first, we want to talk about something you might have seen where you live. The commander in chief is not the only one polishing up the welcome wagon. Local leaders from across the country have been seeking out investments from China; they've made them a top priority, and Mayor Michael Bell of Toledo, Ohio is one of them. And he's with us now to tell us more.

Mr. Mayor, welcome back to the program, thank you so much for speaking with us.

MAYOR MICHAEL BELL: Thanks, Michel. Pleasure to be here.

MARTIN: Now China isn't the only place that you've traveled to on trade trips. You've been to Germany and India, but you've made four trips to China during your first term as mayor, and I wanted to ask how you developed that strategy and what do you see as the upside and is there any downside?

BELL: The way the strategy was developed was that we had some individuals that actually had come to Toledo on their own, and they basically invited us to go to China. We chose to do that because we thought it would be, you know, a wise move. We were a city, at the time, with about a \$48 million deficit. We wanted to be able to reach out to other areas, to be able to do economic development, and the biggest market at the time that I could think of was actually China. And they were doing fairly well with their economy and so, realizing that there are companies internationally that want to be able to put their footprint in America and they're looking for places to step off at, I said, well, why can't Toledo compete for that particular market, and that's what started this whole movement of visiting China and trying to gather their interests in the city of Toledo and the state of Ohio.

MARTIN: Well, I think that when a lot of people think about these international trade missions, they think about American officials going overseas to sell American products overseas. But it's much more of a two-way street now, is that — do I have it right? Or is it really much more, you're looking for Chinese investors to invest in American companies or to build American plants here. Is that really more of the focus now?

BELL: That is the focus. We have a lot of prod-

ucts that, just because of the nature of the market and things like that, to move around globally, that sometimes it's just a matter of cost. And seeing that the costs are starting to balance out more from the standpoint of wages and things like that, it is actually beneficial, in some ways, for Chinese businesses to be able to move their footprint to the United States because a lot of the products that they're making, they're shipping to the United States anyway. So if we could get that product

over here and have American workers building that product, I think that it could be an extreme success. I mean, we have a Japanese company right here in Marysville, Ohio that builds Honda cars, and they put a lot of Americans to work. So my whole idea is that we had, at the time that I started, we had an unemployment rate of about 13.8. I was just trying to come up with any idea possible to be able to put Americans and Toledoans back to work.

MARTIN: I understand that a group of Chinese investors purchased property near your Marina District about two years ago and they — the project has broken ground, but the reports are now that there's some anxiety that the project isn't really going forward as fast as many people would like. Can I ask you about that?

BELL: Yes, and it hasn't. They bought the property, and I think that they're using the same type of intelligence, when it comes to businesses that the U.S. businesspeople are using themselves, because coming out of that recession, people are still not sure exactly where to put their money. And what they want to do is make sure that whatever they build has sustainability. And so, until they feel comfortable with doing that, no different than an American businessperson, they're not going to do it. And I respect that because they didn't get to the positions they're in making stupid investments. So they have an idea and a concept of what they want to do, and I'm quite sure that when it's time to move, they will move. My whole idea and concept was to be able to at least put the seeds in the ground, and hopefully something will grow out of that that will help Toledo in the future.

MARTIN: You used the term, you know, they're just like American businesses in the sense of using the same kind of metric of decision making. But I'm wondering if there's a different reaction to this among constituents, for example, when it's a...

BELL: Oh, yeah.

MARTIN: ...Chinese company versus an American company.

BELL: Oh yeah, absolutely. I mean, you know, it is pretty clear to me that people — some people don't understand that here, that they expect something to happen overnight and they're putting more scrutiny to these Chinese businesses than they would ever do to any American businesses that were in the same position. So I'm always battling that, but I know that if we give it a chance — and that when I say a chance, somewhere within the five or 10-year period of time — that this will actually turn into something great. We already see movements from that standpoint because before, the businesspeople who came here, Toledo would be an afterthought to them stopping. Now, it's a primary stop before they go somewhere else. And so we've already changed the minds of businesspeople coming here, that they see this as a high potential for being able to do business, and they're willing to still look at different operations inside the city of Toledo and Northwest Ohio to be able to possibly put their companies there.

MARTIN: I'm talking with the mayor of Toledo, Ohio, Mayor Michael Bell. He's made four trips to China during his first term in office to forge business relationships. He's also received Chinese businesspeople in his city. We're talking about the effort by local officials to attract Chinese investment into their cities and towns. Mr. Mayor, can you

talk a little bit more about — I'm using this term, you didn't use this term — but I'll say double-standard, that you think that there's a little bit more anxiety about Chinese investors or businesspeople investing in American areas than there would be if these were American companies, even if they're making the same kinds of decisions? Why do you think that is?

BELL: I think that a lot of it is out of a lack of an education on this particular situation, and realizing that our economy now is global and is not basically local, meaning it's not just inside your city, it's not just inside your state, and it's not just inside the United States. In order to compete, we have to be able to compete globally. And so this idea, for some people, is too far ahead and they're more into things being more localized. Okay, why don't you go and find a company, you know, somewhere in Ohio and have them come here? Well, they're facing the same types of problems we're facing. And so it'd be robbing from Peter to pay Paul, and that's just not a good thing. So where I chose to go was where the money was, and I've been following the money on all these trips. When I went to China, I'm following the money. When I went to Germany, I'm following the money — anyplace I go. When I went to India, I'm following the money. And there're large economies there that can afford to do the things that need to happen on this side of the globe to be able to help us out of our economic woes.

MARTIN: But...

BELL: And so that's what I'm looking to do.

MARTIN: ...You know, but there are also stories, though, about the working conditions in China that there've been a number of, you know, exposes recently about working conditions in some of the Chinese factories. I think some people might wonder whether the attitude about workplace safety, relationships between, you know, management and employees is the same. How do you address those concerns? I mean, people say, look, they're reading these stories and talking about workers working six- and seven-day weeks, being on their feet for, you know, hours a day, they're hearing about, you know, relationships between say, you know, management and labor that people just aren't accustomed to here. I think people might have diversity concerns. You're talking about a workplace environment in China which is not used to the kind of ethnic diversity that, I think, many Americans are used to. And, I mean, how do you address those concerns? Or do you feel you have to? Or do you feel that just the regulatory framework, the legal framework that exists in the United States will take care of the problem if there is a problem itself?

BELL: Well, one of the things I will tell you is that I sat down on one of my last trips, and I took a bunch of American businessmen and women from Toledo the last time I went and they were just so impressed with the whole deal. But what I remember is that I was sitting down with a mayor and he was telling me, he says, you know, I read all this stuff that you guys write about us, and he says, and then I walk around my own city, and he

says, and I don't see it. He said, and I know that sometimes the stuff that I'm reading in newspapers in the United States about — or in China, about you all, isn't true. He said, but the only way you're going to ever really figure out what's actually happening is that you have to be able to look people in the eye and be able to figure out what the relationship's going to be. He said, you know, I can find homeless people and I can find this in the United States, but nobody's talking about that. He said it's no different than people being on the streets in China. And so, if you want to make something a big deal, you can. I'm quite sure that there are some problems, okay.

But my whole idea is to be able to try to bring things to the United States and we have standards that we meet here that would take care some of those issues, if there are issues. But the other part is that we have people here who are working two and three jobs. So it's no different from the standpoint of how many hours a day people are putting in work because the economy is so messed up that they have to do that and they're doing whatever they need to do to take care of their families. And so, you know, it's just a matter of which way you want to frame it, to be able to make one person look bad or another person look bad. I'm quite sure there are some issues that we could find right here inside our state of Ohio or the United States that equals some of that and we're just not aware of it or it's not on our radar screen.

MARTIN: Before we let you go, based on your experience, I know you're, you know, sticking it to your wheelhouse, but do you have some advice for President Obama as he and President Xi begin their relationship, based on the relationships you've developed, you know, over the years and the experience that you've had, you know, over the years?

BELL: Well, the main reason that I travel there, and now we have a lot of businesspeople who travel to Toledo, is that it all starts with a relationship and it starts with looking somebody in their eyes, okay. And if you don't trust them, you're probably not going to be able to go anywhere with it. It doesn't make a difference what happens from that point on. It doesn't make a difference what they're telling you. It's about establishing a relationship to where you get and you feel that you can trust a person that you're talking to. It doesn't mean that you can control their policies or their politics, but you've got to know that when they say something to you they're being fairly sincere. And so, my advice, my only advice is that the president, with the new president, has to establish a relationship and through that it'll benefit both countries and people in both of those areas.

MARTIN: Michael Bell is the mayor of Toledo, Ohio. He was kind enough to take time out of his very busy schedule to join us from there today. Mr. Mayor, thank you so much for speaking with us again.

BELL: It was my pleasure, Michel. You try to have a great day.



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